



Foundations of a Healthy Church

Discipleship¹

Questions for Discussion

- What are some common things people may think of when they hear “discipleship?”
- What has discipleship looked like for you in the past?
- How would you define discipleship? Why is discipleship important in the church?

Biblical Theology of Growth

- **Growth as a Scriptural Theme**
 - Growth is a theme that appears multiple times throughout Scripture.
 - **Genesis 1:22** *God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.’*
 - **Genesis 9:1** *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”*
 - Central to God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 is the growth of his offspring.
 - Even in the Psalms, the idea of “flourishing” and “abundance” are central to God’s plans for his people as they walk in Him. (See Psalm 92:12-3, Psalm 49:16-17).
 - In the New Testament, the kingdom of God is likened to a small seed that grows to become the largest plant in the garden (Matthew 13:32).
 - In the book of Acts, the refrain of growth appears several times referring to the number of disciples being added to the church as the gospel went forth through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 6:1, Acts 12:24, Acts 13:49, Acts 19:20).
 - A sign of God’s presence and blessing is growth, abundance, and flourishing. Where His life is present, there’s also productivity and progress.

¹ This lesson is adapted from the chapter on growth and discipleship from *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever, as well as from select portions of David Patt’s chapter on discipleship in his booklet, *12 Traits*.

- **However, we must be cautious:** This does not mean that because something is “big” or “numerous” that it is, in fact, “healthy”. Unhealthy things can also grow; cancerous cells grow more rapidly than healthy ones. Similarly, churches can “grow” because of teaching that itches the ears or because of man-centered consumerism. Outward appearance of flourishing may not accord with God’s assessment.

- **The Aim of Growth**

- Numerical growth is certainly a part of God’s plan for kingdom advance as more hear the gospel and trust in Christ.
- However, the Bible defines healthy growth not by numbers or outward appearances, but by the focus of the growth.
 - **Ephesians 4:15-16** *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*
 - **Question:** What is the aim of growth in this passage? What are we supposed to grow up into?
- The Bible’s chief concern is growth in Spiritual maturity and faithfulness. Numerical growth is the byproduct of the Spirit’s work in believers as they become more like Jesus, and invite others to trust in Him.

- **The Power for Growth**

- Ultimately growth happens by God’s power.
 - **Colossians 2:19** *...[hold] fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.*
 - **Mark 4:27** *And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.*
- This does not mean, however, that we play no role in our spiritual growth.
 - **2 Peter 3:18** *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*
- For the Christian, we grow by cultivating the qualities of Christlikeness that are available to us through the Spirit, in Christ:
 - **2 Peter 1:5-8** *For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

How Growth Happens: Discipleship

- **Question:** How have you seen discipleship done in the past? What do you think could be some misconceptions about discipleship?
- **What is a disciple?**
 - "A disciple ... is someone who learns the gospel, relates in the gospel, and communicates the gospel."²
 - "A disciple of Jesus follows in Jesus' steps, doing as Jesus taught and lived."³
 - **A Definition:** A believer in Jesus Christ who, by the power of the Spirit, loves Jesus, follows Jesus, obeys Jesus, becomes more like Jesus, and sacrificially invests in others to do the same.
 - A believer in Jesus Christ...
 - **Mark 1:15** *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*
 - ...who, by the power of the Spirit...
 - **1 Corinthians 6:11** *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*
 - ...loves Jesus...
 - **Matthew 10:37** *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*
 - ...follows Jesus...
 - **Matthew 16:24-26** *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"*
 - **Mark 1:17** *And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men."*
 - ...obeys Jesus...
 - **John 14:12-17** *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. 15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the*

² Dodson, Jonathan K. Gospel-Centered Discipleship. Re:Lit. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012, Chapter 1

³ Dever, Mark. Discippling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus. 9marks: Building Healthy Churches. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016, 13-14

Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

- ...becomes more like Jesus...
 - **Romans 12:1-2** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*
 - **1 John 2:6** *Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*
 - **Romans 8:29** *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*
- ...and sacrificially invests in others to do the same.
 - **2 Timothy 2:2** *...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*
 - **Matthew 28:18-20** *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*
- **What discipleship is not:**
 - Merely information transfer.
 - Merely accountability.
 - Merely meeting together regularly for encouragement.
 - Merely consuming and appreciating good doctrine.
 - Merely serving others or merely sharing the gospel.
 - **Important:** *These are all good things, but each one individually is insufficient. Healthy disciples, like healthy churches, are seeking to make progress to grow in every area of faithfulness.*
- **Defining Discipleship**
 - **Question:** With the importance of growth and the definition of a disciple in mind, how would you define "discipleship"?
 - Discipleship, simply put, is the process of doing spiritual good to others as you grow as a disciple yourself.

Discipleship in the Local Church

- Spiritual growth happens along two main channels in the Christian life:
 - **The Great Commandments: Luke 10:27** *And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*
 - **The Great Commission: Matthew 28:18-20** ¹⁸ *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*
- The engine of growth in both is **learning** and **obeying**. This is how we grow, and how we help others grow.
- Therefore, **discipleship is fueled by and founded upon learning, understanding, and obeying the Word of God**. The Word is the Spirit-empowered tool for Christian maturing and quipping.
- The local church is the laboratory in which Scriptural obedience and edification take place (using spiritual gifts, encouraging others, praying, holding one another accountable, seeking and giving Biblical counsel, etc.)
- Within the church, healthy disciples will:
 - **Gather** for worship and fellowship.
 - **Grow** in Biblical knowledge, maturity, and holiness.
 - **Give** sacrificially of our time, talent, and treasure to make disciples.
 - **Go** to our neighbors and nations with the gospel.
- Scripture refers to the church as "one body" (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12). We were never meant to make progress in the Christian life alone. God's plan for kingdom advance *and* a disciple's maturity is the local church!
- Each member has a role to play in the health of a church and in discipleship. Discipleship is not a program or a pattern to be relegated to a few, it's the plan of progress for every believer.
- "Good influences in a covenanted community of believers can be tools in God's hand for growing his people. As God's people are built up and grow together in holiness and self-giving love, they should improve in their ability to administer discipline and to encourage discipleship. The church has an obligation to be a means of God's growing people in grace. If instead our churches are places where only the pastor's thoughts are taught, where God is questioned more than he is worshiped, where the gospel is diluted and evangelism perverted, where church membership is meaningless, where prayers are brief and missions is neglected, and a worldly cult of personality is allowed to grow up around the pastor, then one can hardly expect to find a community that is either cohesive or edifying."⁴

⁴ Dever, Mark. 2021. [*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*](#). 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Intentionality in Discipleship

- Corporately, discipleship happens through all of the means described above in the life of a local church. Patterns in the life of the church are opportunities crafted for disciples to do Spiritual good to one another.
- However, these patterns require that each disciple is intentional in doing spiritual good to others.
 - **Hebrews 10:24-25** *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*
 - The focus of the word “consider” in the original language is “one another”, not the “good works”. This is a call to invest in studying one another such that our spiritual investment would be maximally effective.
 - **Titus 2:1-8** *But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. ² Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. ³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. ⁶ Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. ⁷ Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, ⁸ and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.*
 - Here, Paul exhorts older Christians to train and build up younger Christians.
 - In the gospels, Jesus selected a few men in which to invest and prepare for ministry.
- With these and other Scriptural examples in view, every disciple should consider how they can not only participate in the corporate “programs” of discipleship in the life of the church (worship service, prayer meetings, serving opportunities, etc.) but how they can also (1) invest in another’s growth, and (2) receive investment from another.
- **A Pattern for Discipleship:**
 - Do you have a **Paul**? (Someone spiritually more mature who can invest in you?)
 - Do you have a **Timothy**? (Someone spiritually less mature than you in whom you can invest?)
 - Do you have a **Barnabas**? (Someone who is a spiritual peer with whom you can grow together and be mutually sharpened?)

- **A “Program” for Discipleship - Discipleship Groups (D-Groups)**

- While “programs” in and of themselves will not automatically result in spiritual growth, such settings are invaluable to a disciple’s ongoing maturity.
- For example, discipleship groups represent an intentional effort to facilitate disciples doing spiritual good to one another.
- These groups, made up of 3-5 men or 3-5 women, will no doubt include members of diverse ages and experience wherein accountability can flourish, spiritual counsel can be gleaned, and gospel multiplication can occur.
- D-Groups will center conversation around the Bible, including what each disciple is learning and how each one is obeying.
- D-Groups will support each other in prayer and accountability to encourage growth in holiness and evangelism.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12-13